

On the Management of Infants. By J. G. Coffin, M. D.

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THE object of these remarks is to discountenance the application of cold water to new-born infants. If the children who are born in cold climates could be so reared as to rise above the influence of severe and variable weather, they would acquire the highest attainable security for health and longevity.

This is the great purpose of physical education. But how is this desirable object to be accomplished?

Not, on the one hand, by an attempt to withdraw ourselves from those atmospheric changes which, in this country, we are destined to encounter; nor, on the other, by disregarding the effect of habit, to rush unprepared from one extreme of temperature to the other. We can triumph only by such frequent, *gradual*, and habitual contests with our enemy, as shall enable us either to evade or surmount his assaults.

But that I may assign a reason for rejecting the practice opposed, permit me, in a few words, to consider the nature and effects of cold water. Setting aside an examination of this agent, as a *remedy* in diseases, I know but two ways in which it can improve health or prevent sickness,—that is, in which it can be beneficially used by the well.

The first mode is, where cold is applied to counteract a degree of heat which is injurious from its excess; the second is, when it is so used, as to give strength,—to invigorate the feeble operations of a sound body. Presuming this view of the subject to be just, let me inquire, what effect the application of cold water to the bodies of new-born infants is likely to produce. It cannot act beneficially, by diminishing excessive heat, for this does not exist. The question then occurs, can it be useful in the other mode of its operation?

Immersion in cold water, or its affusion over the body, is attended with three distinct effects,—an instantaneous and powerful shock, a sudden abstraction of heat from the surface of the body, and that exertion of vital energy to counteract the shock and to restore the lost heat, which is termed reaction. The practice therefore is never safe, pleasant, or salutary, unless it so affects the system as to be followed by this return of blood and warmth to the skin, with grateful sensations and sensible refreshment.

That these good effects may be secured, the water should be sufficiently cold, and extensively and expeditiously applied.

If these circumstances are disregarded, the effects, on the contrary, will be irksome and hazardous. Now the washing of infants with cold water is conducted in this manner. The nurse, as if apprehensive of doing mischief, though wedded to her error, applies the water partially and sparingly, here a little and there a little, but no where in sufficient quantity for the purposes of cleanliness or health, provided the fluid were of the proper temperature. This scanty application of the water has, I know, been called prudence, and distorted into an argument in favour of the practice;—but it ought to be called, what it is, an absurdity, because the water if suitably tempered, ought to be used *more freely*, and if not of the right temperature, it ought not to be used at all.

Important and desirable as it is that children, in northern climates, should be rendered hardy and familiar with cold air and cold water, it should never be forgotten, that this firmness and security can only be obtained by slow and cautious advances.

The washing and dressing of infants, with their necessary exposure to the air, constitute a sufficient commencement of the *seasoning* regimen for the first three months, during which the water should not be suffered to communicate any sensation of cold. The only exception to this rule is, where the child is oppressed with atmospheric heat, in which case the water should be *pleasantly* cool only.

From this period, if the infant be well, and the weather not cold, the temperature of the water may be gradually lowered, so that at the end of six months, if this be in summer, cold water may be used, that is to say, water not artificially heated. Shall the mother impose on her tender infant a severity, which she herself would shudder to encounter when in health?

What would the never-doubting nurse think, if the harsh expedient were prescribed for herself, which, with equal want of judgment and feeling, she practises on her helpless charge? There is no period of life, nor any condition of health in which this use of cold water is so unseasonable, so dangerous, and I may truly say, so cruel. That so abrupt a change as this is unseasonable or unnatural, will appear from a consideration of the operations and provisions of nature.

The freezing blasts of winter do not at once succeed the fervid heat of summer; the cooling breezes of autumn are interposed, to admonish the vegetable world of the decline of the year and the progress of the seasons.

Among the lower animals, also, the same precautions are observed. Birds protect and defend their tender young by their

nests, the warmth of their bodies, and shelter of their wings. Other animals act on the same plan, in conformity to their different habits and varying resources.

It is for man only to disregard a principle, which we should think *reason* would easily recognise and promptly obey.

That this practice is full of danger to the wellbeing of the infant, will not so readily be admitted, because it will be said, that many children have done well under it. In reply, I contend, that its tendency is always unfavourable.

It is true, that many infants have indeed survived very improper and unkind treatment; but this surely is no defence or recommendation of such treatment, any more than the advanced age of certain intemperate and irregular individuals can recommend or justify their mode of life.

The infliction of useless pain is tyranny, and this practice wants nothing but a malignant intention to be such; while the injury is not the less severe on the innocent sufferer.

But so far as this custom arises from a degree of ignorance or prejudice, which might be removed by a disposition and efforts to obtain just views of the subject, it is blamable and cruel.

On the last day of January, 1816, I found a little patient, three days old, under the cold ablution. She had been previously well and quiet, her loud and piercing shrieks now drew me to her apartment. On ascertaining the cause of her outcries, I desired the nurse to make the water at least luke-warm for the future. Her self-complacency was evidently much disturbed, and her assumed prerogative almost unpardonably infringed.

She complied with the worst grace possible, declaring, that this was the second request only of the kind that had ever been made to her during a long period of many years' employment. This assumption of nurses is not exclusively their own fault, too many mothers consult them as oracles, and obey them with an entire surrender of their own judgment. This led me to inquire, how prevalent a custom might be, which I had rarely witnessed in twenty years' business, and which I had never approved.

Of seven accoucheurs whom I consulted in this town,

1, was indecisive,

1, left the matter to the mother and nurse,

2, used cold water soon after birth,

2, disapproved of it, and

1, said, that infants generally lived whether washed in warm or cold water, and seemed quite indifferent which was preferred.

4, Of an equal number of nurses, always used warm water unless desired to do otherwise,

3, When left to themselves, used cold water, after the first washing, without any regard to the season of the year. From this it appears, that physicians do not always do their duty, and that mothers and nurses are not to be trusted in this matter, without watching.

I do not find any writer on the diseases or management of infants who recommends this practice.

Buchan and Underwood, two of the best authors on this subject, speak of the practice in question, in terms of just reprehension.

I shall close these few remarks, which might be easily extended, by advising mothers to read Dr. William Buchan's "Advice to Mothers." This will, in some good measure, enable them to prevent the mischief which is daily arising from the negligence of physicians, the ignorance of parents, and the rashness of nurses.

Here my remarks ended, and I sent them to a medical friend to read; he has expressed a wish, that I had spared the censure on the nurses, observing, that they derive the practice in question from medical authority, and for himself, that he had not suspected any injury from it. No one is more inclined than I am fully to estimate the value of good nurses and to respect them, or more ready to believe that many such exist. Within the week past I have detected enough of hypocrisy in a worthless one, long to induce me to appreciate highly those who labour to understand and perform their duty.

I would blame and repress only that arrogance and selfishness which prompt some, much sooner to invade the province of the physician than to be useful in their own, rather to impose on the mother and neglect the infant, than to serve the one or take proper care of the other. I would persuade mothers, that if they will exercise their own understanding, they will be quite as likely to comprehend a matter of common sense, as the despotic leaders of the nursery, who in their turn, are too often guided by nothing better than the blind maxims of unthinking tradition.

However this chilling practice may have arisen, its effects, if injurious, as I apprehend them to be, are not the less to be regretted on that account. If, in truth, it has originated from a medical source, it would seem to be peculiarly proper that those guardians of the public health who think unfavourably of it, should expose and renounce it, that the improvements of each succeeding generation of physicians may repair, as far as possible, the defects of their predecessors.

With regard to those subjects which divide the profession, the individual cannot do better than to study them with an open mind, till he can discover the side of preference; to take his sentiments from the dictates of reason, observation, and experience, and to pursue that practice which directs him with the greatest certainty to the comfort and security of the well, and the restoration of the sick. It has been said, or I have imagined, that on some topics we do not rest on the line of truth till we have digressed from it in various directions, have perceived our distance from it, and have felt our need of its support.

If this be true, it only shows the advantage of entering early on the route of discovery, that we may arrive at certainty in good time to make our knowledge useful. The determination not to change, is becoming only to infallible minds. No opinion should be held too dear to be relinquished for a nearer approximation to truth, than the ground we may occupy. In the meantime the highest authority which any man can acknowledge as qualified to govern his conduct, must be those convictions of his own mind which he knows to be honestly, and which he believes to be correctly formed.

Case of an Extra-Uterine Fœtus, successfully extracted by the operation of Lithotomy, by JOSEPH BOSSUET, member of the Medical Society of Massachusetts.

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IN the month of October, 1807, Mrs. Colman, of Braintree, found herself in a state of pregnancy, attended with uncommon distress, and some pungent pains, shooting from the hypogastric to the epigastric regions. She continued in that way, until the latter part of the ensuing spring, when she had all the symptoms of a true travail. She sent immediately for an accoucheur, who, not being able to come at the child by the natural passage, ordered large doses of opium, with the injunction to repeat them as often as the pains recurred. A fortnight after that, the pain abated---the time when I suppose the child died in the abdomen. She was, for two months afterwards, very much troubled by a disagreeable sensation, which she called *drawing*. The abdomen swelled to a very large size, which, after some time, gradually subsided. The three succeeding years she passed without much distress, but, at the end of that time, she began to experience very acute pains,